

Enhancing Young Learners' Speaking Skills through Information Gap Activities

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Abstract: This article highlights the role of information gap activities in developing young learners' speaking skills. We know implementation of different information gap activities in teaching improves not only young learners' language skills, but also their critical thinking skills, as well as their communicative competences. Moreover, these activities give motivation to use the language in real situation and help to develop pair work and group work skills.

Keywords: information gap activities, young learners, speaking, communicative competence, language skills, critical thinking skills, meaning-focused activity, pair work and group work skills, interaction.

Communicative language teaching is based on real-life situations that require communication. By using this method in ESL classes, younger learners will have the opportunity of communicating with each other in the target language and teachers should create a classroom environment where younger learners have real-life communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language. As young learners are social, energetic, and curious, and have a lot of physical energy, they enjoy learning through playing different games and moving around the classroom taking part in various communicative activities in order to talk to each other. Therefore, at the lessons of foreign languages in order to encourage children to use the target language in their life, as well as, to develop their communicative skills, competency and culture, the teachers should use some strategies, which help to enhance their communicative skills, form their interest and motivation to study the language.

Teaching young learners is different from teaching teenagers or adults, therefore, teachers of young learners must be creative and flexible to make their classes lively and effective. In addition, for the successful teaching of English in primary schools, it is essential for the teacher to understand the young learners' characteristics, instincts, and interests in their cognitive, linguistic, and emotional aspects, as well as they must be aware of organizing different communicative activities in order to involve young learners fully in the learning process.

Studies have shown that one of the most effective activities that promotes young learners' communication competences, as well as enhances speaking skills, is *Information Gap activities*, which help to increase young learners' motivation to learn English and use the language in real-life situations. According to Prabhu "Information gap activities involve a transfer of given information from one person to another—or from one form to another or from one place to another—generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language", while Harmer states that this type of activity is labeled as a meaning-focused activity as well as "*reasoning gap*" and "*opinion gap*". The "gap" is the incomplete information two speakers have about a conversation topic. Moreover, Willis points out that this type of technique is also implemented to focus on meaning to "*gain fluency at the expense of accuracy*".

As stated above, information gap activities are part of the communicative approach and, they are useful to promote fluency and motivate young learners to interact, as well as these activities help learners how to communicate more fluently through conversations and how to learn new words and improve pronunciation. In addition, information gap, as one of the aspects of communication in the classroom, refers to structured output activities and they are very important in teaching foreign languages since they are close to real-life situations. To fulfil the task, young learners have to interact, to create questions and share information.

Information gap activities practice real communication and the goal of these activities is to discover certain information, whether about the other person or related to a specific activity. While using these activities, pupils have to exchange information by asking and answering, and only by communicating successfully, they can get the information to complete the task. So, Pupil A asks questions about missing information, similarities or differences in the pictures in his/her part and Pupil B answers Pupil A's question(s) according to the information in his/her part. Thus, they interact with each other in order to find the missing information.

From my teaching experience, I can say that whatever the children's age, it is important to provide frameworks for speaking activities, which encourage them to use English for real purposes, and I can confirm that the following information gap activities are beneficial and can be used with younger learners in order to improve their speaking skills:

- ***Back to Back Information Gap activity*** - Pupils A and B are sitting back to back. Pupil A is given a picture. He/she describes it in English to the Pupil B whose task is to draw his/her own picture as close to the original one as possible;
- ***Spot the difference activity*** - Learners work in pairs. Each of them is given a set of two very similar pictures (Picture A and B) with only a few differences. They cannot see each other's picture, thus they take turns in describing their pictures and asking questions and together they try to find all differences.
- ***Role-play*** - Each pupil in a group is given a role card for a role-play, which includes a problem-solving activity. However, they are not aware of the details of the other group members. Young learners enjoy conducting the role-play, and try to solve the problem.
- ***Guess the card*** - Young learners work in partners. One pupil holds a card so that their partner cannot see. The partner must ask "yes/no questions" to determine what is on the card. Often teachers structure this activity to fit with the theme of a particular unit.
- ***10 questions*** – A teacher assigns 10 questions on a piece of paper for Pupil A, and Pupil B is given a situation that contains all the answers to these questions. Both pupils are not allowed to view each other's papers. Thus, these pupils try to communicate with each other.
- ***Words on back*** - Young learners work in large groups or as a whole class. Each learner has a word attached to his or her back; he/she must then circulate asking each other "yes or no questions" to determine what word is on his/her back.
- ***Fill in the chart*** - Young learners work with their partners. Both learners are given tables with information missing. What is missing in one partner's table is there on the other partner's table and vice versa. Pupils must ask each other questions to discover what is missing in each of their tables.

So, information gap activities can be used in any level to promote speaking tasks as they provide optimization of time for learners to speak in class. Learners use speaking and listening to solve problems, speculate, share ideas, make decisions and reflect on what is important. Social relations in the classroom depend on talk, and young learners' confidence and attitudes to learning are affected by friendships and positive interaction. Information gap activities, as an essential part of the learning process:

- enable young learners to learn and practice the target language in meaningful context;

- improve young learners' different skills needed for the language acquisition process;
- offer a variety of experiences and improves young learners' 4 language skills;
- promote a learner-centered classroom;
- increase intrinsic motivation;
- enhance peer-to-peer collaboration

Overall, it can be said that implementation of information gap activities in teaching English at Primary education help move the learners from working in a more structured environment into a more communicative environment, as they are hopefully using lots of the target language, and in the process discovering where they have gaps. Moreover, these activities not only improve young learners' communicative skills, such as speaking and listening, but also enhances their critical thinking skills and helps to consolidate the vocabulary and grammar rules of the previous lessons, as well. Only while designing information gap activities with younger learners, their age and level of social, cognitive and emotional development need to be taken into account.

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